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CANADIAN URBAN INSTITUTE

The Greater Toronto Area:

An Urban Region

Working Paper Series WP-1

Canadian Urban Institute, 1991

WP-2 The Greater Toronto Area: an Urban Region

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe briefly the geographic, governmental, demographic and economic characteristics of the Greater Toronto Area and to outline major urban policy and planning challenges that various levels of governments face. A specific argument is put forward toward defining the Greater Toronto Area as an urban region, that is, a regional complex of several municipal governments, sometimes in conflict and sometimes in cooperation.

THE GREATER TORONTO AREA

What is an Urban Region?

Between 1900 and 1990, like other cities in the United States, Western Europe and Australia, Toronto has experienced regional urban growth, that is a type of urban growth that spilled over its immediate hinterland and covered areas, jurisdictions and municipalities that were beyond the nineteenth century core city. The emergence of streetcar suburbs and their proliferation with the emergence and development of the automobile as a dominant mode of transportation were both symptoms and reasons behind this regional urban growth.

Before the Second World War, the response to regional urban growth in Toronto was quite fragmented and involved annexation of neighbouring areas and municipalities or the formation of special purpose bodies (boards, agencies and commissions). The the emergence of metropolitan government has been the characteristic response to regional urban growth during the postwar period, and has often been described as a 'workable solution.'

But as we approach the twenty-first century, we observe that many metropolitan governments that originated from servicing problems of sprawling cities are becoming like those original cities further sprawling into surrounding areas resulting in vast urban regions comprising numerous municipal governments and other jurisdictions. Many urban regions around the world face similar problems of fragmentation and sprawl.

What is the GTA?

The area defined as the Greater Toronto Area, located in the Province of Ontario, comprises five two-tier municipal governments: Metropolitan Toronto and the four regional municipalities: Durham, Peel, York and Halton.

Metropolitan Toronto was established in 1953 in response to rapid urban growth and servicing problems. The four regional municipalities were established between 1971 and 1974 as part of a large scale provincial reorganization of various municipal governments in the area.

The name Metropolitan Toronto is considered virtually synonymous in North America with effective metropolitan government. When it was established as a federated form of metropolitan government for the City of Toronto and its twelve suburbs, it was rapidly able to overcome serious public service deficiencies. Metropolitan Toronto became a model for students of metropolitan affairs throughout the continent. Metropolitan Toronto seemed to have achieved the ideal government that preserved the existence and integrity of area governments while allowing for the coordinated and effective treatment of areawide servicing needs.

Since the 1970s, however, most of the urban growth has occurred outside Metropolitan Toronto and in surrounding regional municipalities. The planners and policymakers in the region now view urban growth in its regional context, and the GTA is an expression of that view.

Governmental System

The GTA is, in other words, an urban region comprising five upper-tier governments (one metropolitan and four regional) and thirty lower-tier governments whose planning and policy decisions affect each other and the region as a whole.

The GTA is not a jurisdiction by itself and there are no plans to create the GTA as a government. Although the GTA is a much less complicated urban region in terms of the number of municipal governments when compared with Chicago or San Francisco, the GTA has not escaped the political fragmentation and complexity characteristic of such urban regions in North America, Australia and western Europe. To begin with, as mentioned, the GTA comprises five upper and thirty lower tier municipal governments. Six of the lower-tier area municipalities are in Metropolitan Toronto, the others are distributed among the four suburban regions as follows: Durham, 8; York, 9; Peel, 3; and Halton, 4. Although the number of area municipalities in the GTA is less than half the number that existed in 1966 (when the provincial government began a process of municipal consolidation that reduced the number of municipalities in Metropolitan Toronto from thirteen to six), regional planning still faces considerable difficulties in policy coordination (consolidation of small into larger units was also a feature of regional government formation in most of the larger urban areas in Ontario in the 1970s).

Although municipal policy making occurs at all three levels of government (municipal, provincial and federal) in Canada, provincial governments possess the constitutional power to create and regulate municipal governments. The governmental body with greatest potential to influence the GTA as an urban region is the Ontario government. The ministries of Municipal Affairs, Transportation, Environment, Treasury and Economics and Community and Social Services make important decisions that influence the GTA. A number of provincial agencies also directly affect the GTA. These include the Ontario Municipal Board, an appointed tribunal with broad powers primarily on issues of municipal finance; Environmental Assessment Board; the Environmental Appeal Board, and; the Greater Toronto Area Transportation Operators Authority.

A newcomer to the provincial agencies mentioned above is the Office of the Greater Toronto Area (OGTA), headed by a deputy Minister. The OGTA was established in 1988 within the Ministry of Treasury and Economics and then shifted in 1989 into the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. The OGTA does not have any legislative mandate. Its role is (i) to foster communication among the various units and levels of government with an interest in the future development of the GTA; (ii) to seek solutions to immediate problems that no single government is able to solve on its own; and (iii) to help governments in the area 'develop a consensus on what the Greater Toronto Area should look like 20 years from now.' OGTA also works closely with another provincial agency, the Greater Toronto Area Coordinating Committee (GTCC), whose membership consists of the Chief Executive Officers of Metropolitan Toronto, the four regions, the City of Toronto, and seven local municipalities whose borders abut the Metropolitan Toronto boundary. The Committee was established in 1987 and now reports to the OGTA.

Overview of Population Growth and Distribution

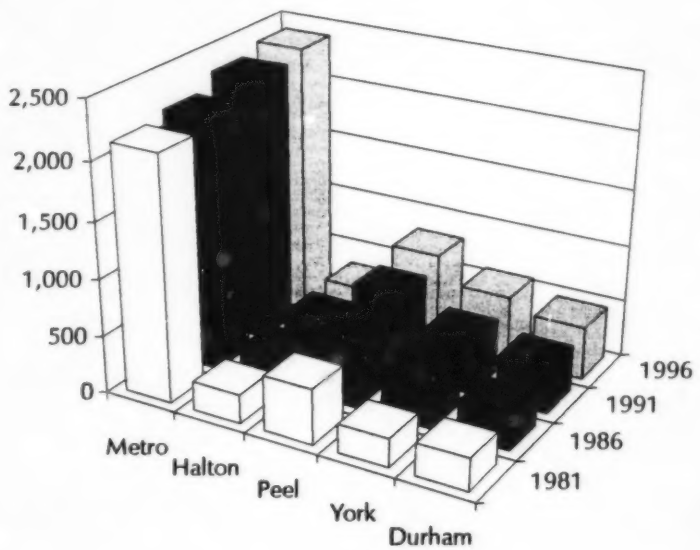
The GTA is the most populous urban region in Canada. With just over 2,700 square miles the it occupies only 0.4 percent of Ontario's total land area but in 1986 contained 41.0 percent of the province's population, up from 33.8 percent in 1961. During the same period (1961-1986), the GTA's share of the population of Canada rose from 11.5 percent to 14.7 percent.

In 1986, 3.7 million people resided in the GTA. By 1990, population of the GTA is estimated to have reached to 4 million. Projections based on current trends suggest that the area will have about 5.3 million in 2011, at which time it will account for 44.8 percent of the Ontario population. Geographically,

population in the area is becoming increasingly deconcentrated. Since 1971, the population of Metropolitan Toronto has stabilized at just under 2.2 million people. Almost all of the population growth in the region since then has been occurring in the surrounding regional municipalities.

Until 1971 Metropolitan Toronto absorbed the bulk of the area's new population growth, at the rate of about 50,000 persons per year. While the GTA has continued to absorb more than 50,000 persons per year since 1971, the share of Metropolitan Toronto within the GTA fell from 77 percent in 1961 to 59 percent in 1986. Metropolitan Toronto has experienced negative net migration since 1971, with its 4.9 percent population increase resulting entirely from natural increase.

The Greater Toronto Area Population, 1981-1996 (000s)

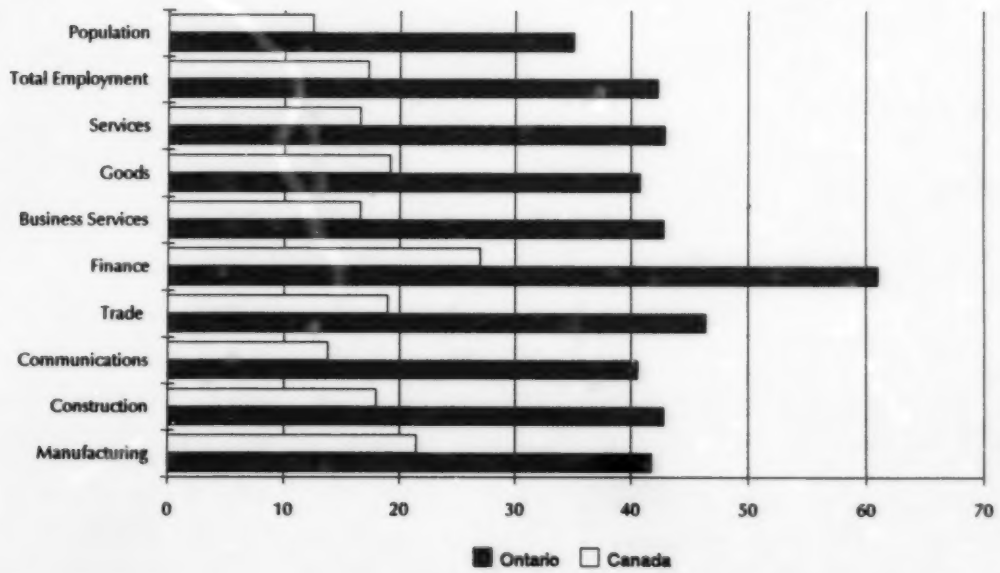


Recent policy and demographic trends indicate that the population of Metropolitan Toronto may decline by the year 2011 while the GTA will continue to grow by slightly less than its current rate. The provincial government has nonetheless accepted a Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department population target of 2.5 million for the year 2011, even though the figure assumes that Metro will be able to encourage a substantial increase in migration (both international and domestic) and production of new housing (this new production is expected to take the form of intensifying the existing housing land use). Despite this possible population increase, the population of Metropolitan Toronto is expected to account for less than half of the GTA population by 2011, with estimates ranging from 43.7 percent to 48.3 percent.

The pattern of population distribution that is reducing Metropolitan Toronto's relative position in the GTA is parallel to changes that occurred in the relationship of the City of Toronto to the rest of Metropolitan Toronto before and during the 1950s. In 1951, just before the creation of Metropolitan Toronto, the City had about 676,000 people, or 60 percent of the population of the thirteen area municipalities. By 1986, the City had just under 613,000 people, or 30 percent of the population of Metropolitan Toronto and only 16.4 of the GTA population.

Economy

The importance of the GTA to both the Ontario and Canadian economies is illustrated by the following graph, which shows employment in major categories in the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (slightly larger area than the GTA) as a percentage of Canadian and Ontario employment. The graph shows that the Census Metropolitan Area's share of employment exceeds its share of population for most employment categories. The graph also attests to a high degree of diversification, a characteristic that has made the area less vulnerable to recession than other urban areas. Nonetheless the area did suffer a generalized decline in the rate of population growth and economic activity during the recession of the early 1980s. Its recovery has been strong in all but the manufacturing sector.



Like other urban regions around the industrial world, the GTA is participating in two important trends having far-reaching implications for government policy. One is a gradual shift of employment, particularly manufacturing employment, from central to peripheral locations. The second is an overall decline in the manufacturing sector and an increase in office and service sector employment throughout the area.

The decline in manufacturing in the GTA represents a generalized decline affecting Canada as a whole. In fact, the GTA's share of total manufacturing employment in Canada rose between 1975 and 1982. One consequence of the relative decline of manufacturing and the shift towards a service economy has been an increasing reliance of the central municipalities in GTA on attractiveness as locations for office-based activities. By 1988, about 60 percent of office space in Metropolitan Toronto and over 50 percent of GTA office space was located in the City of Toronto.

The impact of regional urban growth, the location of an increasing share of the GTA population and employment outside Metropolitan Toronto, and the growing importance of the office and service sectors to the GTA economy are conditioning planning at all levels of government operating in the GTA.

PLANNING IN THE GTA

Although there are some agencies and boards that provide services across the GTA, there is no agency that is responsible for planning the GTA. GTCC and OGTA are mainly agencies that coordinate planning of municipalities in the area.

Planning Process in Metropolitan Toronto

From its creation in 1953 until 1980 Metropolitan Toronto functioned without an official plan. Nonetheless, planning has been an important part of its history in that period, which has been characterized by a tension between the upper-tier and lower tier governments.

There were two important attempts to develop an official plan in 1959 and in 1965. Both these attempts failed to produce an approved official plan. Although metropolitan planners attempted to incorporate planning objectives of area municipalities, the principal reason behind the failure of attempts to develop official plan for Metropolitan Toronto was local opposition to

metropolitan planning. Area municipalities perceived the upper-tier as a threat to their legal power to develop land-use plans. However, these attempts articulated important metropolitan planning principles, which not only guided and influenced planning in local municipalities but also were incorporated into the successful Official Plan of 1980. These principles were the development and maintenance of a strong central city; higher suburban densities than are common in North American metropolitan areas; a diversity of land uses in all area municipalities; the dispersal of public, low-income housing throughout the suburban municipalities; and a transportation system in which public component (subways, light rapid transit, and an extensive bus network) has played an increasingly prominent role.

The Official Plan that Metropolitan government approved in 1980 reinforced and restated these planning principles. It gave particular emphasis on housing intensification in order to provide new housing inside Metropolitan Toronto and a nodal development around few centers to supplement the central city of the metropolitan area. At present, Metropolitan Toronto is reviewing another official plan, whose themes are interwoven with the future of Metropolitan Toronto within the Greater Toronto Area.

Planning Process in Regional Municipalities

When the regional governments were established in the 1970s, they were required that they produce a regional plan within their first three years of operation, after which all local plans would have to conform to it. Of the four regional municipalities surrounding Metropolitan Toronto, only Durham and Halton regions have managed to produce Official Plans, both of them within the allotted limit.

The difficulties preventing the adoption of Official Plans the fast-growing municipalities of York and Peel have been similar to the difficulties that prevented Metropolitan Toronto from acquiring an Official Plan for more than thirty-five years. Reluctance of local councils to surrender control over their development choices to a second tier of government has been paramount among the constraints on regional planning. A second constraint has been uncertainty among planners and politicians about the nature and requirements for regional plans, and how they are to differ from local plans. Provincial planning legislation and guidelines do not make a distinction. A third constraint was the loss of enthusiasm for regional government among provincial officials after 1974 because some regional governments were politically unpopular.

Ontario government initiatives to enhance its capacity to deal with regional urban growth in the GTA signal a commitment to manage the area more vigorously and more systematically than in the recent past. Yet both OGTA and GTCC have stated that the government does not intend to produce a formal plan for the GTA. The government, through OGTA and GTCC, is promoting an areawide strategy that will allow for continuing growth while maintaining a satisfactory quality of life for the residents of the region. The emphasis is on coordination of the plans of local governments and provincial ministries, and on consultation and cooperation. It is not on planning.

Two of the main reasons for the emphasis of government on coordination and cooperation rather than planning are (i) the limited success of attempts by both provincial and regional governments to produce comprehensive land use plans in the past, and; (ii) the many constraints in implementing plans in a multi-government region.

Within these constraints, the provincial government initiated a project on the future spatial form of the region. It commissioned a research study to inquire into potential benefits, requirements and risks of three urban structure concepts: spread, nodal and central. Spread is a status quo concept, representing a continuation of existing trends, characterized by substantial population growth in the surrounding regions of Metropolitan Toronto at relatively low density, with continuing concentration of office development downtown and in various subcentres in Metropolitan Toronto and the four regions. Central is a concept in which substantial additional population growth and intensification occurs within the central parts of the GTA (particularly in metropolitan Toronto) along with further intensification of commercial growth, such that the rate of urbanization occurring beyond the existing urban boundaries would be significantly reduced. Finally, nodal is an intermediate concept in which the broad distribution of population and employment is more similar to that of spread concept, but in which growth occurs primarily in and around existing communities in a compact form, resulting in a reduction in the rate of consumption of undeveloped land relative to the spread concept.

The study was completed by the IBI group, a consulting firm, and was publicly released in June 1990. Consistent with the provincial government policy of coordination and cooperation, the IBI study emphasized that it was not a planning study and that the study did not make any recommendations. The study provides systematic information about the implications of various growth options to stimulate public discussion from which a consensus may emerge on how to manage regional urban growth.

PLANNING AND POLICY CHALLENGES IN THE GTA

As mentioned, rapid urban growth is occurring in the four Regional Municipalities of the GTA. The geography of urban growth raises major issues including the structure and density of development and the balance and mix of population and employment, which greatly affect infrastructure requirements. Metropolitan Toronto is becoming the 'central city' of a sprawling urban much like the sprawl of the City of Toronto that led to the formation of the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto as a federated form of government in 1953. The difference is, however, to create yet another level of government is not considered as a serious policy option today. Hence much of the debate on the future of the GTA as an urban region, its planning, and management will revolve around its governance.

Major planning policy challenges that the GTA faces can be briefly outlined as follows.

Sustainable Regional Urban Growth

The Greater Toronto Area, like other urban regions around the world, is under considerable pressure to adjust to and respond to dangers of global warming. A reduction in gasoline emissions (from automobile dependence), waste and water and soil polluting substances is becoming important policy issues that affect planning and land use decisions. The Greater Toronto Area now faces important planning and policy challenges that can be directly related to environmental issues: public versus private transportation; recycling versus reducing waste, and; spread versus concentrated regional urban growth.

Housing Intensification in Metropolitan Toronto

As of 1990, most of the land within Metropolitan Toronto has been developed; population growth has slowed but employment growth continues (although a recession is expected) and there are significant options for further population growth through intensification and the development and redevelopment of a number of major sites. The implications of the housing intensification in Metro, the mix of new housing units and potential implementation tools are important issues.

Transportation

Although transportation has been mentioned in relation to both environment and housing, the issue of how to integrate the transportation system of the

region stands apart. Mostly because of the dispersed nature of regional urban growth in the region in the 1970s and the 1980s, the predominant mode of transportation is by automobile in the surrounding regions, while Metro Toronto has been served with a first class public transportation network (a commentator has described the GTA as Vienna surrounded by Phoenix). As the spread form of growth continues, it becomes more difficult every day to integrate and rationalize public transportation across the whole region. And current densities in the surrounding regions make it impossible to introduce efficient public transportation services.

Provision of Human Services

In the GTA as a whole, rapid growth in population and employment, compounded by unprecedented increases in per capita demand for transportation, hard services (water and sewer), waste disposal, housing, health, education, social services and recreation, have placed great strains on the infrastructure required to provide these services. Important decisions on the density, structure and mix of land uses and the types and location of infrastructure will be required in order to enhance the quality of life for the GTA inhabitants (such as housing, economic opportunities, transportation, water supply and sewage and waste disposal, preservation of green areas, preparation for potential consequences of global warming, and enhancement of social services).

Changing GTA Demographics

Continuing rapid growth is projected for the GTA and, while the rate of per capita increases in demand for urban services may taper off to some extent (e.g., with the saturation of the rate of entry by women into the labour force and a correspondingly reduced rate of employment growth relative to population, increasingly due to aging of the population), massive infrastructure investments will be required to address supply-demand deficits which accumulated during the 1970s and 1980s, along with the requirements of an additional 1.5 to 2 million people expected in the GTA by 2011 and 2021.

CONCLUSION

Future Planning Agenda for the GTA

A coordinated long range planning and a means for the overall management of regional urban growth and development of infrastructure is required which,

while relatively easy in earlier decades when most of the growth was occurring in Metropolitan Toronto, is now more complex because of the involvement of five regional governments, thirty local municipalities, and a large number of boards and commissions. The provincial government, through the Greater Toronto Coordinating Committee (GTCC) in cooperation with the relevant ministries, has been working with representatives of the regional and local municipalities to set up a workable process to provide this coordinated approach. Whether this process will adress the planning and governance issues of the GTA as an urban region effectively remains to be seen.

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The proceedings of a symposium organized by the Canadian Urban Institute for the provincial government's Office of the Greater Toronto Area. It brought together academics, researchers, and policy-makers from Chicago, Frankfurt, Melbourne, Paris, the Randstad, and San Francisco to outline the challenges faced by their urban regions. Peter Hall delivered a keynote address that set an international context for dealing with the challenges of regional planning and management in the Greater Toronto Area.

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Prepared for the Community Services Department, Metropolitan Toronto, this research paper examines current trends in demographics and public policy and their implications for social programs. It also examines the economic trends that will affect social policies, such as unemployment, growth in the service sector, and increasing competition within the world economy.

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WP-1 The Greater Toronto Area: An Urban Region

The Greater Toronto Area (Metropolitan Toronto and the four surrounding regional municipalities of Durham, Halton, Peel, and York) is an urban region comprising 30 local and five regional municipalities. This paper briefly describes the geographic, governmental, demographic, and economic characteristics of this urban region and the challenges it faces.

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